

Elsie Daniels & The Cherokee Rose

BY FRANK FUNDERBURK



The Georgia state flower, the Cherokee Rose, tumbles over a garden wall, boasting full bloom in the springtime sun.

Photo by Alex Smith

Just a few short years ago our state flower was almost unknown to most of the state's citizens. Now it is in every county in our state due to the hard work of two groups and one individual who urged the groups into action and helped them get the job done.

The individual is Elsie Daniels and the groups are The American Association of University Women (AAUW) and the Monroe County 4-H Clubs of 1980-1985. Elsie is a member of AAUW and her husband, Cecil, was Director of The University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service/4-H Clubs in Monroe County during this time period.

But the story of the Cherokee Rose begins long before 1980.

The legend of the Cherokee Rose is found in several texts in local libraries and goes something like this. It seems a Seminole Indian Chieftain was taken prisoner by the Cherokee Indians who were enemies of the Seminoles. He was doomed to death by torture but became ill before the execution could be carried out.

The Cherokee worked to bring him back to good health so they could then

execute him. A Cherokee maiden was given the job as his nurse. As she nursed him back to health they fell in love. As his strength grew she knew he would be executed soon so she urged him to flee. He would have none of that unless she went with him.

She agreed and as they fled she stopped and asked that she could go back and collect a memento. She returned and broke a sprig of the vine growing on her father's cabin.

Once the couple returned to the land of the Seminole she planted the sprig at the door of her home. Here the plant grew and bloomed its white flowers with yellow centers. From that time this flower has been known as the Cherokee Rose.

In 1916 the Cherokee Rose was adopted by Georgia's General Assembly as the Georgia State Flower. This came about after a request by the Georgia Federation of Women's Clubs.

Resolution Number 42 proclaimed *Rosa laevigata*, Cherokee Rose, as the state flower.

From 1916 until the early 1970s there wasn't a lot going on with the Cherokee Rose. There was an occasional garden club project that involved planting the

state flower. While working in Thomasville in the late '70s I met a gardener who tried desperately to have more Cherokee Roses planted in the Rose City. But many folks were against such a crusade since they believed the Cherokee Rose to be a nuisance once established. They, as some folks do today, had confused the Cherokee Rose with one of its family kin. More on that later.

In 1971 the bulletin of the Georgia Division of AAUW was renamed "The Cherokee Rose." The story is that the Georgia AAUW members urged the name change after learning of a similar publication in Mississippi called "The Magnolia." That's how the AAUW got involved in promoting the state flower.

The idea of promoting the Cherokee Rose for a project of the Georgia AAUW came about in 1980. After a study committee found "a vast lack of first hand knowledge of our state flower" the

AAUW realized greater possibilities for increasing communities' awareness of our state flower and promoting a greater understanding of our cultural heritage.

Now the 4-H Clubs got involved. Elsie and Cecil asked the 4-H members and Extension Agents throughout the state to assist in propagating and planting the Cherokee Rose in every county in the state. In October 1980 the Cherokee Rose Project was set in motion.

Every branch of the AAUW in Georgia received information about the project and how the 4-H Clubs could help. AAUW wasn't in every county but 4-H was. So the partnership formed. By Spring of 1981, 40 new roses had been planted statewide and about 200 more were ready for planting.

Letters for county 4-H leaders came in to the Monroe County 4-H office. Information on propagation and planting was mailed out. State 4-H administrators wrote to each county encouraging participation in the effort.

In the following years, Elsie and Cecil Daniels and numerous 4-H members became intimate with the Cherokee Rose. Monroe County 4-H members would meet to take cuttings or "pot-up" rooted cuttings. Some of them still fondly remember the hard work.

Celestine Sibley, columnist for *The Atlanta Constitution*, wrote a wonderful column that told of the project and how a Macon lady named Mary E. Hudson, known as Granny, contributed her knowledge of rooting the Cherokee Rose to get the project going strong. Elsie wasn't having much luck. But Granny got her going in the right direction.

In June 1985 Elsie was on hand when a Cherokee Rose was presented to the 159th county. In the four-year period that the project spanned, Elsie, Cecil, 4-H members and AAUW members traveled lots of miles, met lots of folks, received letters from Max Cleland and Zell Miller and others con-

gratulating them on their project.

The Daniels gave a rose to The University of Georgia Botanical Garden (now the State Botanical Garden), the garden's first. When the Garden celebrated its 25th Anniversary the Cherokee Rose was the logo used.

The Daniels' daughter, Louise, presented her painting of the Cherokee



Elsie Daniels and her husband, Cecil, cultivate dahlias with the same enthusiasm they have given the Cherokee Rose. Photo by Ken Krakow

Rose to Mrs. George Busbee. The Daniels also worked with state officials to correct inaccuracies in the depiction of our state flower in the Capitol's museum. In 1982, Elsie and Cecil carried the state flower to the National Arboretum in Washington, D.C. It was planted and is still on display today.

Even though all 159 Georgia counties now have the Cherokee Rose, Elsie and Cecil are still hard at work singing its virtues. To get it planted seems to have been their first step. Now they

are working hard to clear up confusion and misconceptions about the plant.

One of the misconceptions is that the Cherokee Rose becomes a weed. This bad information has probably come about because of the confusion between the Cherokee Rose and the Macartney roses.

The Cherokee Rose, *Rosa laevigata*, has glossy, evergreen foliage. The leaves have three leaflets about 1 inch wide and 1-1/2 inches long. The flowers are white with a golden center made up of yellow stamens and about 3 inches in diameter. They bloom from late March to late April. Occasionally they will bloom again in the fall.

The Macartney Rose, *Rosa bracteata*, flowers in early June, and blooms until frost. The leaves are small and consist of 5 or 7 leaflets. The foliage is dull green, often gray looking. This rose produces seeds that birds eat and spread. It also produces underground runners that make it very invasive.

Unlike most roses, the Cherokee Rose does not have black spot, a fungus disease common in our area. It has many thorns that make it a safe haven for, among other creatures, our state bird, the Brown Thrasher. It will provide a blanket for year-round greenery for arbors or fences. It is a truly great state flower.

But it is not common in our nurseries. This may soon change. Cherokee Rose is joining more lists of nursery plants in growers' catalogs

every year. Because of its tremendous numbers of thorns it is not a popular plant to work with. But many growers are putting up with the inconvenience of a few thorn pricks to produce Georgia's state flower. Soon it will be easily obtained and can easily be added to our landscapes.

It's a great plant with a great history. Many people have worked hard to make it familiar. Join with them, plant your own Georgia State Flower, the Cherokee Rose. ◀◀